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Media Study/Buffalo

Eaux d'artifice, by Kenneth Anger (1953)

Kenneth Anger's film is, logically enough, a film about artifice--both as subject and as cinematic process. "Eaux d'artifice" does not exist as a correct phrase in French; instead, the title is constructed by one of language's oldest artifices, the pun. Feux d'artifice means "fireworks" (literally, artificial fires), and so eaux d'artifice are logically water-works, or "artificial" waters. The meaning of "artifice" here is that of its original usage in English (from the French), "the action of an artificer, the making of anything by art, construction, workmanship" (O.E.D.).

And so Anger has constructed this film as a work which brings its subjects--waters--out of artifice. Perhaps this is too much explication of what might be just a bad pun, but it seems to me, to the contrary, that the film works in this way, as an artifice in the sense of that which arises by "art, construction, workmanship."

Workmanship: the film was shot with black-and-white film sensitive to infra-red light and "Printed on Ektachrome through a Cyan filter. The Fan of Exorcism hand tinted by Kenneth Anger with Spectra Color." (Anger). The results of this careful but relatively unusual process are visible in the remarkable texture of the film's images, and in the spectacular effect of the hand-tinted fan, towards the end.

Construction: the film has a highly developed formal structure which stems from both the compact integration of Vivaldi's Winter (from the Four Seasons) on the soundtrack and from the tight progressions and rhythms of its images. Beginning and end, for example, are coupled by the vertical matching of The Lady and fountain jets of water. Basic cinematic options--such as dissolves or straight cuts, zooms in or out, and panning left and right or up and down--all work in abstract, almost musical progressions. One could map these aspects of the work with the precision of a cartographer.

Art: although Anger himself has implied that this film is based on literary references, Eaux d'artifice seems primarily a hymn to the liberating powers of artful illusion. The beautifully constructed and worked surface of the film results, at the level of "relation to reality," from a complete overturning of "natural" or everyday relationships. First of all, the film is a consistent attack on any notion of scale. It is impossible to distinguish (except in an approximate way) size relationships in the images--the most clear demonstration of this being the fact that the "Lady"who

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wanders up and down the staircases is played by a midget. Secondly, sexual distinctions are themselves obscured: the "Lady" is a man. Finally, inanimate objects seemingly come to life, as in the multiple water jets which "become" (almost literally) the source of the unison violin arpeggios on the sound track or, most curiously, the gargoyles which "look at" The Lady as she descends two staircases in quick succession towards the end of the film.

Eaux d'artifice recalls Anger's earlier work, Feux d'artifice (1947), and the artist considers the two films a single unit. Beyond "artifice" itself, both works concern the notion of carnival--through the festive music and transvestism of the "water works" and the "dream within dream" structure of the earlier film. Fireworks and waterworks meet, in a sense, in the carnival, the ultimate reversal of social and psychic structures. Time is suspended, fixed relationships also. Eye and ear revel in a liberation from meaning, through the glorification of the senses for their own sake. Fireworks and "waterworks" have no time except that of their own occurrence, and no fixed "point of view" except that implied within the shifting sounds and images.

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